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WAKULLA SPRING: ITS SETTING AND LITERARY VISITORS

by LOU RICH

WAKULLA SPRING, situated on the coastal lowlands about midway between Apalachee Bay and Tallahassee, has a surrounding area comprised mostly of woodlands of cypress, live-oak, magnolia, and pine. The spring itself is semi-circular with a diameter of 400 feet, and it covers an area of approximately five acres. It is 103 feet deep and has an average flow of 283 cubic feet per second. The water is moderately hard and typical of most Florida springs.¹

"It is the fountainhead of a river, . . . [and] wells up in the very heart of a dense cypress swamp . . .," according to Charles Lanman's description in his *Adventures in the Wilds of the United States and the British Provinces* written in 1856.² Lanman was referring to the spring as the source of the Wakulla River, which joins the St. Marks River and flows into the Gulf of Mexico's Apalachee Bay.

The original Indian name for the spring was "Tah-ille-ya-ahan," meaning "where the water flows upward like the rays of heavenly light out of the shadow of the hill."³ Through the years the pronunciation of this word was altered, and by the nineteenth century it had become Wakulla, meaning mystery, a description which a writer in 1855 felt was "a conception as chaste as correct."⁴

The first explorer to visit the region was Panfilo de Narvaez in 1523. He was followed by Hernando de Soto in 1539. De

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1. G. E. Ferguson, C. W. Lingham, S. K. Love, and R. O. Vernon, *Springs of Florida*, Florida Geological Survey, Geological Bulletin 31 (Tallahassee, 1947), 169-171. The spring has been variously spelled as Wakhula, Wachullah, Wacully, Waccolla, Wakully, Waculla, and Wakhula.
 2. Charles Lanman, *Adventures in the Wilds of the United States and the British Provinces*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, 1856), II, 143.
 3. Frank Drew, "Florida Place-Names of Indian Origin," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, VI (April, 1928), 204.
 4. E. S. Gaillard, "Medical Topography of Florida," No. II, *Charleston Medical Journal and Review*, reprinted in *De Bow's Review*, XIX (November, 1855), 539-557.

Soto and his men discovered St. Marks Bay and set up winter quarters in the area near Tallahassee at Anhayea in November, 1539.⁵ The theory that Ponce de Leon saw the spring, thus giving rise to the legend of the "Fountain of Youth," has some supporters, but there is no historical evidence to substantiate this belief. Soldiers and traders likely came into the area but no permanent settlements were made until the Spanish missionaries arrived in the 1630's.

During and prior to this time the Apalachee Indians lived in this area. One of the Muskogean tribes, the Apalachees inhabited the region from Pensacola east to the Ocilla River, and were most numerous in the Tallahassee-St. Marks sections. In 1655 it is estimated that there were between six and eight thousand, but by the eighteenth century they had been reduced to less than fifteen hundred by repeated raids by the Creeks and British. The Apalachee Indians were finally forced to merge with the Creeks.⁶

The Forbes Purchase contained about two million acres of land east of the Apalachicola. This vast tract was purchased from the Indians by John Forbes and Company with the consent of the Spanish government.⁷ It included land in present-day Franklin, Liberty, Gadsden, Leon, and Wakulla counties. When the United States acquired the Florida Territory in 1821, there was the question whether the trustees of John Forbes retained title to the land, but the United States Supreme Court ruled in their favor in 1835.⁸ The Apalachicola Land Company was organized in November, 1835, to sell this acreage.⁹ Wakulla County was created out of Franklin, Gadsden, and Jefferson counties in March, 1843, and it became part of Florida's ante-bellum cotton kingdom.¹⁰

5. John S. C. Abbott, *Ferdinand De Soto* (New York, 1898), 203; *Final Report of the United States De Soto Expedition Commission* (Washington, 1939), 159-165.

6. F. W. Hodge and T. H. Lewis (eds.), *Spanish Explorers in the Southern United States 1528-1543* (New York, 1907), 21.

7. Caroline Mays Brevard, *A History of Florida From the Treaty of 1763 to Our Own Times*, 2 vols. (De Land, 1924), I, 58-59.

8. Decree of confirmation by U.S. Supreme Court, October term, 1835, reported in ⁹ *Peters*, 711-741.

9. Deed Rook E, Leon County Records, November 28, 1835, 100-104.

10. *Acts and Resolutions of the Legislative Council of the Territory of Florida*, 1843, 29-30. The act declared, "That the district or county included within the following boundaries to wit: Beginning at the

Wakulla Spring was known locally as a natural curiosity and was the site of outings and picnics. As settlers moved in and access to the area became easier, the spring was visited by a number of travelers. In 1850, George S. King, a Philadelphia naturalist, and his assistant, G. L. Brockanbrough of Wakulla County, discovered the bones of a giant mastodon in the spring. According to the Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, the bones were on the northeast side of the spring, scattered over an area thirty by eighty feet and at a depth of from thirty to almost fifty feet in two places. Lying on sand, their outlines and shape were almost perfectly retained. There was no sign of petrification, and their texture and general formation could be seen distinctly.¹¹ The principal part of each hip bone, a part of one blade bone, and other bones had been discovered. The piece that they attempted to raise weighed approximately 150 pounds, and the tusk was estimated at about 300 pounds.¹²

After making his discovery, King announced the following theory as to how the spring was created:

That mighty beast . . . was doubtless walking leisurely along one, to him, unlucky day, and just at that spot, when all of a sudden, the ground gave way beneath him, and into the deep they went, trees, earth, beast and all, and the beast being unable to extricate himself from the sad predicament into which his bad luck had plunged him, did in this way lose life. It is in this way too . . . that the appearance of the Wakulla Spring is to be accounted for.¹³

The discovery of mastodon bones and the ensuing publicity increased the number of visitors to the spring, but it did not become an important attraction at the time. Florida lay outside the general overland travel routes through the South. Most European visitors and native observers, even such notable itinerants

Gulf, thence north on the range line between range two and three, until it intersects the north boundary of section twenty-four, township two, range two, south and east; thence due west on that line until it strikes the Ocklockonee, river; thence down the river, until it strikes the Gulf; and thence along the line of the Gulf, to the point of commencement, (including islands), shall constitute a county, to be called the county of Wakulla."

11. Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, June 18, 1850.

12. Jacksonville *News*, July 6, 1850.

13. Tallahassee *Florida Sentinel*, June 18, 1850.

as Frederic Law Olmstead, never came to Florida. Those who did visit the state, however, usually went to Tallahassee, and from there it was relatively easy to take the Tallahassee-St. Marks railroad to the spring's vicinity. After the Civil War the flow of visitors was greatly accelerated.

Recorded accounts of visits to Wakulla Spring date back to 1823 with the description from the journal of John Lee Williams, who was examining sites for the location of Florida's capital: "The spring is a beautiful oval basin of almost unfathomable depth. It presents to the eye a pale azure translucent surface, under which are seen myriads of fish in little companies, at times sporting in the flood, and again disappearing behind the cliffs of rock which project into the fountain."¹⁴ Williams described the spring in a report to Richard Keith Call:

. . . [I] surveyed the Wakully to its source, which is a grand spring pouring forth at once a navigable River, which will carry six feet of water to its source, full of the finest fish, but also full of grass, which obstructs the navigation . . . There is a fine, high hammock on the west side of the Spring . . .¹⁵

In 1829 the Tallahassee *Floridian and Advocate* made it the subject of an editorial:

The wide spreading and majestic oaks that hang over its abyss of waters-the innumerable flowering shrubs and parasitical plants peculiar to this climate, with which they are interwoven, give this enchanted spot an air of grandeur and beauty, that can only be conceived by one, who has floated on its waveless surface in an immeasurable height, while gazing upon the magic scene reflected from its bosom. Such is the transparency of the water, that it is sometime before a person feels at ease - he clings to his frail bark as his only hold on the earth.¹⁶

Well-known travelers like Charles J. LaTrobe, the English writer who traveled extensively with Washington Irving, were also impressed with the spring. "The source of the Waculla," he wrote in 1835, "forms a large circular basin of great diameter,

14. "Journal of John Lee Williams," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, I (April, 1908), 44.

15. Brevard, *A History of Florida*, I, 263.

16. Tallahassee *Floridian and Advocate*, September, 1829.

in which the water appears boiling up from a fathomless abyss, as colourless as the air itself. No bottom has been found with a line of two hundred fathoms." He added, "The stream, which runs off to the southward, admits of being navigated by boats from the very fountain; and the myriads of fish which frequent these pools, and evidently swarm among their subterraneous channels, are not their least remarkable feature."¹⁷ Another traveler in 1835 wrote that "the greatest natural beauty . . . the greatest curiosity of the whole South, is the source of the Wakhula. . . . This lovely sheet of water is 120 yards in diameter - so still, and of such perfect transparency, that the smallest object is seen at the immense depth of water below; and the spectator upon its surface, sits and shudders as if suspended in empty air."¹⁸

Wakulla Spring, according to John Lee Williams in his *Territory of Florida*, published in 1837:

. . . "is of unknown depth and perfectly transparent. In looking into it, the color resembles a clear blue sky, except near the border, where it has a slight tinge of green from the reflection of the surrounding verdure, which hangs over it in drooping branches and waving festoons. The eastern side presents a rugged rocky precipice, all else is an abyss of boundless depth. . . . The beauty of the fountain, the luxuriance of the foliage around it, and the calm retirement of the whole scene, render this one of the most charming spots that West Florida affords."¹⁹

The *St. Augustine News* in September, 1841, reprinted this sketch of the Wakulla from the *Knickerbocker*, the New York magazine:

Our first sensations, when we shot out from the reeds and bushes which skirt the margin, were those of great dizziness. The water is so pure and clear, that we felt suspended in the air, and clung to the boat very much as we may suppose an aeronaut finds himself clinging when in his sublimest flights. The air above you is scarcely more transparent than the water below; the thin shadows of the cloud are thrown a

17. Charles J. LaTrobe, *The Rambler in North America*, 2 vols. (New York, 1835), II, 47.

18. *Letters on Florida* (New York, 1836), 15.

19. John Lee Williams, *The Territory of Florida* (New York, 1837), 147.

hundred feet below you, and spread out at the bottom of the spring; and the image of your boat is carried down with perfect fidelity, and with its oars and rudder looks like some huge animal crawling with outstretched legs along the ground. The modest fishes have no sort of privacy; and what is worse for them though better for the fishermen, they have no safety. You can watch the hook as it sinks, and can accurately place the tempting bait within an inch of the abstracted and innocent nose.²⁰

The French traveler, Francis Comte de Castelnau, visited Wakulla Spring during his American tour in 1842, and published his observations in a book entitled *Vues et Souvenirs De L'Amerique Du Nord*. The Frenchman and his party left St. Marks and ascended the Wakulla River in canoes. Progress was slow because of fallen trees and high grasses growing at the river's edge. Castelnau was impressed by the forests that lined the winding banks and the presence of alligators, pelicans, snowy white egrets, and other long-legged birds he could not identify. When they reached the spring itself Castelnau felt that the area had about it a sublime tranquility. He drank of the spring's water and pronounced it very pleasant tasting.²¹

By 1843 there was a fairly steady stream of visitors to the area. In that year P. Randall, a Wakulla County resident, made the first real attempt to turn the spring into a commercial venture. He announced his plans in the Tallahassee *Star of Florida*: "Since the country has been cleared of the Indians, these springs have attracted much attention from strangers visiting this section of the country."²² This bit of information was comforting because, as Castelnau pointed out, between 1837 and 1840 several families who had settled along the Wakulla were massacred by the Seminoles.²³

Randall offered the use of a new boat to view "this interesting spectacle." He had also cut out a new road from his house to the spring, which shortened the distance and was more pleasant. In addition, he offered to provide the visitors with meals and lodging

20. St. Augustine News, September 17, 1841.

21. Francis Comte de Castelnau, *Vues et Souvenirs De L'Amerique Du Nord* (Paris, 1842), 146-147.

22. Tallahassee *Star of Florida*, May 25, 1843.

23. Castelnau, *Vues et Souvenirs*, 147.

at his house, feed for their horses, and to do whatever else he could to make their visit pleasant and agreeable. "His charges," he added, "will be moderate."²⁴ No records reveal how long Randall maintained his venture or how profitable it was.

Mary Bates, a writer for *The Opal*, a magazine published in New York in the 1840's, visited Wakulla Spring in February, 1845. Carried away by the spring and her own prose, *The Opal's* correspondent wrote:

After leaving Tallahassee we soon entered the piny woods. Their monotony broken only by the pathway of sand which lay before us, white as snow. As we approached the spring the woods were diversified. . . . And this unique, crystal-like, well-like spring hides itself in a wild wood swamp; in the midst of this chaos, Nature has carved out a marble basin, and from a fountain deep and invisible its silver waters well up.

. . . The magnificent basin was skirted with water lillies, 'Niad's lovliest wreath'; and scarcely had the oars shaken off their broad green leaves, when our bateau floated on water a hundred feet in depth. . . . The water was as transparent as air, and yet it seemed air consolidated, for like a prism it separated the rays of light, and gave us from the lowest depths the richest hues.

. . . and lying in those bright, pure depths, there seemed caverns formed of pearl and emerald. Fit palace for Neptune. . . . Or here might be Titan's hut or a Mermaid's grot, or a Naiad's home, or here the heroic maiden might shelter her out-lawed knight in 'coral caves' and 'sparry bowers,' like Neuha, daughter of the Southern seas, and beautiful as night, who hid her Tonquil, safe from the reckless crew, beneath the ocean's surges and the sea-birds' nest, in a palace of stalactites, 'whose only portal was the keyless wave.'

. . . Farewell Wachulla, not again may these eyes greet you, but with many a cherished scene will your image be treasured. Thy wild wood swamp, thy eagles' eyrie, thy lily-girt basin, thy aerial waters, thy sparkling grottoes, like a gleam from fairy land, will cheer and embellish a weary moment or a lonely hour.²⁵

Writing in the *Charleston Medical Journal* in 1855, E. S. Gaillard gave his view of the spring. He said, "Wakulla spring

24. Tallahassee *Star of Florida*, May 25, 1843.

25. Mary Bates, "Wachulla Springs," in *The Opal: A Pure Gift for the Holydays* (New York, 1847), 22-24.

. . . is certainly the largest and most wonderful spring in the State. The stream ejected is able to bear a boat on its surface, immediately below the fountain. It is difficult to reach the spot by navigation, as the water is clogged with flags, rushes, weeds, etc.; this mode is, however, considered best, as conducing to give the most pleasing and wonderful view of the spring. Suddenly the immense mass breaks upon the eye, a circular lake in size and appearance, with waters as clear as crystal. The depth of this spring is incredible and almost inconceivable, . . ." Gaillard then described vertigo, a sensation common to most of the spring's visitors: "Whilst gazing upon this wonderful creation of nature and attempting to analyze the unfathomable depths below, one beholds the clear and perfect reflection of heaven's concave, with clouds flitting across its field, as it were a transient breath upon the surface of a faithful mirror. Many who visit this spring are thus disagreeably affected, feeling as though suspended between two atmospheres; the feeling is one of giddiness, which disappears on approaching the margins, where trees and shrubs usurp the place of clouds and sky."²⁶

In 1859 the Fernandina *East Floridian* took note of a traveler who had visited the spring: "Taking a narrow path we crossed through some dense underwood, and all at once, stood on the banks of the Wakulla Spring. . . . The thick bushes were growing almost to the water's edge, and bowing their heads to the unrippled surface." Continuing, the journalist noted, "I think the water possesses a magnifying power. . . . We rowed toward the north side, and suddenly we perceived in the water fish, which were darting hither and thither, and long flexible roots, luxuriant grass on the bottom all arrayed in the most beautiful prismatic hues. The gentle swell occasioned by the boat gave to the whole an undulating motion. Death-like stillness reigned around and a more fairy scene I never beheld."²⁷

On the eve of the Civil War, "Batchelor," a correspondent of the Charleston *Daily Courier* made a tour of Florida, visiting Jacksonville, Lake City, Madison, and Tallahassee. A highlight of his tour was a visit to Wakulla Spring. "Here a large stream of water bursts up in clear limpid bubbles, and edging around,

26. Gaillard, "Medical Topography of Florida," 539-557.

27. Fernandina *East Floridian*, October 6, 1859.

finally passes off forming the Wakulla River. Nothing astonishes the visitor more than the wonderful transparency of these streams. Dropping a dime into the Wakulla is the customary tax upon the hidden mysteries. The little coin twirls about as it descends, and down, down, into the unfathomable it continues to go - yet for seconds you watch its descent through the crystal fluid. Ours, we suppose, [must] have gone to China, for we never saw it stop.”²⁸

The stream of visitors declined during the Civil War, but interest in Wakulla Spring revived after 1865. Daniel G. Brinton in *A Guide-Book of Florida and the South* in 1869 included a description of the spring. “The water is cool, impregnated with lime, and of marvellous clearness,” he observed.²⁹ Sidney Lanier called the site “one of the most wonderful springs in the world.” He wrote, “you can plainly see a sort of ‘trouble in the ground as the water bursts up from its mysterious channel, one feels more than ever that sensation of depth itself wrought into a substantial embodiment. . . .’”³⁰

Eunice White Beecher, wife of Henry Ward Beecher, in her book *Letters From Florida*, quoted an account from a correspondent of the New York *Evening Post*:

As we approached the center, I noticed a jagged, grayish limestone rock beneath us, pierced with holes; through these holes one seemed to look into unfathomable depths. . . . We hung trembling over the edge of the sunken cliff, and far below it lies a dark, yawning unfathomable abyss. From its gorge comes pouring forth, with immense velocity, a living river.³¹

Ellen Call Long, the well-known Tallahassee authoress of *Florida Breezes* and daughter of Territorial Governor Richard Keith Call, recalled a trip to the spring:

Our route for several miles stretched through a barrier of heaven-reaching pines; then a hammock district. There was no torrent or jet, . . . but a glassy, unruffled surface of water . . . and nothing from the first view to indicate

28. Charleston *Daily Courier*, April 3, 1861.

29. Daniel G. Brinton, *A Guide-Book of Florida and the South for Tourists, Invalids, and Emigrants* (Philadelphia, 1869), 8.

30. Sidney Lanier, *Florida, Its Scenery, Climate, and History* (Philadelphia, 1875), 115.

31. Mrs. H. W. Beecher, *Letters From Florida* (New York, 1879), 81-82.

clouds, azure sky and the deep verdure of surrounding trees of cypress, entwined with jessamine and honey-suckle, which hung trailing, lost in other vines and briars, and all veiled with the Spanish moss, before the fabled virtues of this physical Lethe, whose waters reposed as if in mosaic tapestry, making a scene of enchantment, inviting rest and dreamy enjoyment.

. . . the spring . . . at its border looked like opals, pearls, and emeralds, dissolved and diluted in diamond water.

. . . The moss-covered stones, jutting irregularly from four to more than a hundred feet below, where they centre around a fathomless depth; the flexible roots and grasses all bathed in rainbow hues; the numerous fish, eels, and even alligators, sporting in their element, reflecting the same prismatic coloring, together with the gentle dreamy gliding over the depths of aquerous transparency, and its kaleidoscopic changes, accompanied by the music of the many throated wood songsters, make it a fairy scene, in which for the time we lose all sense of the earth. . . .³²

A. A. Robinson, author of a promotional book on Florida, concurred with Mrs. Long when he said, "Certainly no natural object can be more beautiful than the appearance of this great fountain, on a clear day, when no wind disturbs the face of its waters."³³ George M. Barbour included a description of the spring in his *Florida For Tourists, Invalids, and Settlers*, published in 1882, calling it "another local lion," lying in a "flat, uninteresting pine-wooded region, near several cultivated cotton plantations." He told of a rude landing and an old Negro who rowed visitors out on the smooth surface of the spring. The sides of the spring were almost perpendicular and were composed of solid, smooth rock, Barbour found, and "the water is so marvelously blue that indigo would look pale in comparison with it, and so clear that small gravel and bits of tin 1 inch square could all be seen plainly on the bottom. . . . While the water is blue, the rocks are intensely brilliant green, over which occasional phosphorescent flashes of shimmering light play fitfully, producing a weird and phantasmal effect."³⁴

32. Ellen Call Long, *Florida Breezes: or, Florida, New and Old* (Jacksonville, 1883), 284-287.

33. A. A. Robinson, *Florida: Pamphlet Descriptive of its History, Topography, Climate, Soil, Resources, and Natural Advantages* (Tallahassee, 1882), 55.

34. George M. Barbour, *Florida For Tourists, Invalids, and Settlers* (New York, 1882), 83-84.

Abbie M. Brooks, alias Silvia Sunshine, in *Petals Plucked From Sunny Climes*, described the trip she took in 1883 from Tallahassee to St. Marks on the train and the subsequent carriage ride from there to Wakulla: "We can feast our eyes with its pearly hues and changing, shimmering waters, dancing in the sunlight. . . . The water is blue limestone, but it looks green from reflection, and very cold, said to produce a numbing effect upon those who try bathing in its transparent depths."³⁵

In 1885 the Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian* published a collection of letters called "His Letters From Tallahassee" concerning life in the "Big Bend" area. One described a writer's reaction to his first glimpse of Wakulla: "The spring simply surpasses anything the imagination can picture from the most vivid description, and bears about the same relation to all other springs I have dreamed of, that Niagara does to a canal lock or a beaver dam. . . . Wakulla Spring is credited with being the identical well of rejuvenating waters that brave old De Leon rambled about in search of. It is sincerely to be hoped, . . . that if the gallant cavalier did stumble on it in his wandering, he had with him in the breast pocket of his duster, a tickler of *aqua dient* to mox with his draught. To my prosy and unimaginative senses, a thimble full of the veritable 'critter' possesses more rejuvenescence than a barrel of these limpid waters."³⁶

In 1889 the writer James W. Davidson claimed that Wakulla Spring was one of the most wonderful things of its kind in the world.³⁷ Clifton Johnson, author of travel books, agreed in his *Highways and Byways of Florida* that the spring was indeed re-

35. Abbie M. Brooks (Silvia Sunshine), *Petals Plucked From Sunny Climes* (Nashville, 1883), 347-348. The author added to her description of Wakulla Springs by quoting an unknown writer: "This charming nympeum is the product of primitive nature, not to be imitated, much less equaled, by the united effort of human power and ingenuity. As we approach it by water the mind of the inquiring traveler is previously entertained, and gradually led on to a greater discovery-first by a view of the sublime dark grove, lifted up on a shore by a range or curved chain of hills at a short distance from the lively green verge of the river on the east banks, as we gently descend floating fields of the nymphae in limbo, with vistas of the live-oak, which cover a bay or cove of the river opposite the circular woodland hills."

36. Tallahassee *Weekly Floridian*, December 10, 1885.

37. James Wood Davidson, *The Florida of Today: A Guide for Tourists and Settlers* (New York, 1889), 101.

markable, sending "off a full-grown river . . . from its single outburst."³⁸

Senator Harry B. Hawes of Missouri, vice-chairman of the Senate committee on conservation of wildlife resources, visited Florida in the early 1930's to study laws and conditions surrounding the state's wildlife and fish. After seeing the spring for the first time, the senator said, "Wakulla Spring may some day belong to the government, and be developed as the eighth wonder of the world." According to the Tallahassee *Democrat* the Senator declared that the natural beauty immediately surrounding the great spring and the scenic wonders found in the spring bowl, the crystal clear water, the marine life, and the enormous size of the flow, said to be the largest in the world, entirely justified official recognition on the part of the national government.³⁹

Thomas Barbour in *That Vanishing Eden, A Naturalist's Florida* commented on the spring's "sense of timelessness and mystery" and the "bewildering variety of aquatic vegetation." He described his trip there as a "unique experience."⁴⁰

Knud Clauson-Kaas, a Dane who toured America in 1948, included Wakulla Spring on his itinerary. He found the spring beautiful and pictures of it were included in his book, *Vi Ruller Gennem Amerika*. Clauson-Kaas described at some length the area's wildlife.⁴¹ The spring's appeal, rather than decreasing, has increased in the twentieth century and present-day visitors are no less impressed with its beauty than were those of former years.

38. Clifton Johnson, *Highways and Byways of Florida* (New York, 1918), 117. For a similar description, see John T. Faris, *Seeing The Sunny South* (Philadelphia, 1921), 174.

39. Tallahassee *Daily Democrat*, April 16, 1931.

40. Thomas Barbour, *That Vanishing Eden, A Naturalist's Florida* (Boston, 1944), 116-117.

41. Knud Clauson-Kaas, *Vi Ruller Gennem Amerika* (Copenhagen, 1948), 156-157.